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THE INSANITY OF OSCAR HUGO WEBBER

BY

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## THE INSANITY OF OSCAR HUGO WEBBER.

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On December 6th, 1886, William H. Martin, a jeweller, living at 1311 South street, Philadelphia, was shot and almost instantly killed by Oscar Hugo Webber, during an altercation between the two men in the former's shop, under the following circumstances:—

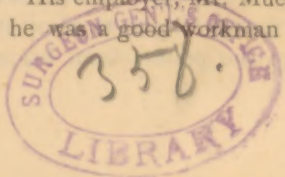
About eleven months before the fatal affair Webber had bought of Martin a common, cheap clock, with which he had received a guarantee that it would be kept in good order for one year. Six months after the purchase Webber took the clock back to the jeweller on the strength of this guarantee, but not seeing Martin, who was ill, conducted a conversation with Mrs. Martin, during which the wife became angry, for what reasons, or because of what behavior or expressions of Webber's, have never appeared. She reported this occurrence to her husband, who also became incensed. Four months later (November, 1886) Webber again returned the clock for repairs; and upon December 6th, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he came again to get it.

Martin was very busy at his work-table in an adjoining room. He went behind the counter and handed the clock, wrapped up in brown paper, to Webber, who asked to have the alarm set off so that he might see that it was all right. This was done. Then followed some angry conversation between the accused and Martin, who having in his mind the alleged insult offered to his wife, and being annoyed at the persistence of Webber in returning the clock under a *bona fide* guarantee, became aggressive toward the accused. The excited jeweller finally ordered Webber from the shop in a voice

the tones of which were raised so high by anger that they attracted the attention of the daughter who was back in the kitchen. Going around the end of the counter he went to the door and held it open as he ordered the accused to leave the shop. Webber took the clock under his arm and walked toward the door with the intention of going out. When he reached the door Martin either struck or seized him to thrust him out, when Webber, losing all self-control, drew a pistol from his pocket and fired four shots into Martin's body. He then made no attempt to escape, but walked out of the door buttoning up his coat. The only effect of the quarrel visible was a scratch upon his face. He was soon followed by a crowd, and after he had walked a few paces into Broad street was arrested by a policeman. He was taken before a magistrate, admitted the shooting, and was imprisoned.

At the trial of Webber, in October, 1887, the sole defence made by his counsel, Messrs. Fisher and Carr, was insanity. This was based upon the man's history, as amply brought out by competent witnesses, and upon his mental condition during his imprisonment, as reported upon by Dr. Chas. K. Mills and the writer, who were engaged to give expert testimony for the defence, and who visited him frequently in Moyamensing Jail. The brief analysis of his case which I intend to make will be based upon this history and these examinations:—

Webber was born in Germany, and came to this country in 1873. He was about 33 years of age at his trial. He was a machinist and engineer. His employer, Mr. Mueller, testified that he was a good workman and



steady. After seven years of faithful service, during which time he had married and had had two children, and had by thrift and sobriety saved up in ready money nearly two thousand dollars, his employer noticed a change in him. He complained of not feeling well, and absented himself from work. He reappeared one day at a late hour in the afternoon, and instead of resuming his work, sought a private interview with Mr. Mueller, and confided to him his belief in the infidelity of his wife. He said that he had seen men in the house, and had seen them jump the fence. He went away and returned another day, staying about his employer's until evening. Mr. Mueller was so impressed with the delusional character of this belief that he tried to argue him out of it, for he had known and employed Webber's wife before her marriage and had confidence in her character. His employer finally persuaded him, as a sick man, to go and see a doctor, and said in his testimony, "I noticed his expression and whole conversation were like those of a man who is suspicious and cannot be trusted." About this time Mr. Mueller recommended him one evening to go to a restaurant for supper, and afterward to seek a physician's advice, suggesting his own family physician, Dr. Schrotz. That same evening Webber followed his employer home to a distant part of the city, and appeared at his door agitated and in fear. "I took him in," testified Mr. Mueller; "my wife and sister-in-law pitied him. His condition was like, I don't know what." Webber told them that he had feared to finish his supper in the restaurant, because he had been watched by three men, and he thought he would be poisoned. He left the restaurant, averring that the three men followed him, and in order to throw them off his track he ran from one street to another. Dr. Schrotz was sent for, visited the excited man and prescribed for him. The patient was not satisfied until he had caused himself to vomit in order to dislodge the poison from his stomach. He

was then taken to bed by his kind-hearted employer and wife. At midnight Webber aroused Mr. Mueller and his wife by knocking at their door, and said that the men who followed him had got in the window. His host arose, went down stairs, lit the gas, and searched the house, to convince him of his error. At 4 o'clock in the morning he again knocked and begged to be allowed to stay in Mr. Mueller's room. At six o'clock the thing was repeated. During the following week he hung around his employer's factory, but did not work. He complained, and reiterated his suspicions of his wife. At the end of another week Mr. Mueller was in doubt about engaging him again "on account of his acting," but he pitied the man and directed another man to see if he attended to his work right. All went well then for two months, when Webber proposed to his employer that he be taken into partnership in the business. He was put off with a non-committal reply. He had given his employer \$1600 to keep for him, which was returned to him, and in January, 1886, about eleven months before the tragedy, he finally quit Mr. Mueller's employ. There was no reason why he should give up a position in which he had worked long and acceptably, and he had no plan of support in view, except one or two chimerical schemes, as will be seen.

Dr. Schrotz testified that he had found Webber, on the visit referred to above, very much excited and declaring that he feared men who followed him all the time. The Doctor warned Mr. Mueller's wife that Webber might be noisy at night. Dr. Schrotz also stated that Webber came to him two months afterward, and asked him for a certificate of sound mind, and the Doctor further states, "At that time he was out of his mind, suffering from hallucinations. When I saw him he undoubtedly was not in his right mind."

Dr. Lamparter testified that he had been Webber's family physician for nine years, and had attended the prisoner, his wife,



child, father, mother, and sister. He had seen the prisoner in August preceding the homicide, and had found him much excited. Webber told him that his brother was in the house with his (Webber's) wife; that he had caught him once and would have shot him then, but his brother got out of the keyhole. Dr. Lamparter told some of Webber's relatives, two weeks before the shooting, that the prisoner was insane and ought to be put in the asylum at Norristown. He also testified that Webber's sister was suffering with epilepsy.

Several competent witnesses, acquaintances of Webber's, testified to the change in his character and habits before and about the time of his leaving his old employer. All of them noted his changed appearance and expression, saw that he was melancholy, morose or irritable, and heard him express suspicions of being followed by men, of attempts made to poison him, of his family conspiring against him, and of the unfaithfulness of his wife. One of them had even watched him narrowly to see if he had been drinking and if he staggered, as the only explanation of his rambling talk and insane look, but the prisoner had always been sober and not even a moderate drinker. There was no testimony of his ever being drunk. One or two of these witnesses had expressed decided opinions, several months before the shooting, that Webber was losing his mind. It was also testified that after leaving Mr. Mueller he had a variety of schemes for starting in business; that he had gone to New York and to Chicago to set up a factory of straw goods although having only \$1600, and that he had also some intention of starting a bakery, and going into the insurance business.

The period between Webber's leaving Mr. Mueller and the killing of Martin was eleven months, and was fully covered by the testimony of his brothers, mother and wife. He was voluntarily out of employment, attempting to further his various abortive schemes, and was becoming more

and more insanely suspicious of his family and jealous of his wife. The contrast with his former steady and industrious habits and affectionate and dutiful domestic life could not have been more marked. He accused his family of robbing him. He kept up a constant espionage upon his wife, resorting to tricks and contrivances to detect her in her alleged amours; boring holes through doors, jumping suddenly in at the parlor windows from the street, and standing over her with a pistol in his hand as she slept. He accused her again and again of chloroforming him and of changing her paramours into cats and dogs. His language to her was harsh and brutal, and a neighbor frequently heard the unfortunate woman's cries. He was insomniac and in poor physical condition. This finally culminated, three months before the shooting, in his driving his wife from his house. Mrs. Webber in her extremity appealed to the Guardians of the Poor, and when she represented his case to them she was told he must be insane, and was supplied with a blank certificate of insanity at their office and was told to have it filled up. This certificate was shown in evidence. During these last three months little is known of him. He seems to have immured himself in his house with his children, supporting himself with the money which he had left.

His wife's character was exonerated by all who knew her, and several whom he accused as her paramours testified under oath to their innocence. All the testimony of his insanity was uncontradicted; and the prosecution offered as witnesses of his soundness of mind only the policeman who arrested him, the magistrate who committed him and the deputy-coroner who officiated at the inquest. He was nevertheless promptly found guilty and sentenced to be hung.

Webber was examined five times in prison, both by Dr. Mills and myself. Some of these visits were made by us together and some separately. From copious notes of these examinations I desire to present a

brief summary. It can be stated in general terms that the prisoner preserved always a suspicious manner, great reserve in his answers, and showed occasional irritability of temper. His answers were quite peculiar; they were always evasive and sometimes rambling, and it was difficult often to say whether this was the result of a confirmed, suspicious mental bias, or whether it portrayed a mind weakened to the verge of incoherence. My own opinion, after careful observation, was that the prisoner could have answered the questions much better, but that he was in a condition of chronic distrust and had no confidence in any person who was admitted to his cell. It is significant that he received his lawyers in precisely the same way as his doctors, and never gave them any assistance in preparing his case. He refused to inspect the jury list. His manner at times was rather boastful when the subject of his trial was broached, and he remarked once in a supercilious and contemptuous way that we would see when the trial came—as though he would take care of himself, and had some *denouement* in view. When one of his lawyers, losing patience, told him he was acting like a fool, he became very angry and said he expected to be treated like a gentleman. He was told that some people said he was insane, to which he replied in an unaffected way, and with perfect truth, that it was enough to make him insane to keep him where he then was. He would say nothing about his delusions or the shooting of Martin; or express any regret for the act. He was at times very irritable and unapproachable, displaying a decided insane manner and expression. Upon the second visit, when I entered his cell alone, he immediately became very restless and menacing; would answer no questions, and ordered me to leave him. Upon the third visit he was found chained to the floor, evidently because his keepers had cause to fear him. On this occasion he was perfectly mute, which seemed to me to be partly in resentment of his harsh treatment.

There was no evidence at any visit of simulation or parade of symptoms; the man was natural in manner, only reserved, suspicious, and often in ill-humor.

The class of insanity to which Webber evidently belongs, and of which he is a very typical example, is monomania, or primary delusional insanity. He has a series of the most common and characteristic delusions of persecution. In the more recent phraseology of the schools he is a paranoiac. This differentiation which, in its sharp outlines and practical utility, we owe mostly to the Germans, includes the large body of the criminal insane. It is based essentially upon the recognition of an hereditary or neurotic constitution, tending to degeneration of mental faculties and the formation of fixed, systematized delusions. These delusions are apt to be of an alternately expansive and depressive type, leading to impracticable schemes and projects on the one hand and to suspicious and resentful conduct on the other. Such erroneous ideas are firmly fixed and have a logical coherence and plausibility which cannot be shaken or abashed. These lunatics are by far the most dangerous to themselves, to their families and to society. While they are often not difficult to recognize they become, for some inexplicable reason, the theme about which wage many of the controversies in our courts of law. Webber is of this class a type—and if his disease is to merit no recognition in our criminal procedures, I had almost said that the medical jurisprudence of insanity may as well be erased from our books, or be preserved only to gratify scientific curiosity, or to be utilized by a more enlightened age.

The connection of Webber's delusions with his crime ought not to be made a test of his responsibility. It has been quite conclusively shown that the mind of this unfortunate man had been for a long period gradually undermined by a train of most depressive and irritating delusions; that these delusions had attached first to one person and then to another, from his wife



to the strangers whom he met by chance in a public saloon. What persons and how many had come within the apprehension of that diseased mind it is not within the province of any man to say. No one can fathom the depths of another's soul; and no one can tell to what extent this man's will-power or self-control was perverted during those gloomy months when his mind inhaled the upas of insane suspicion and distrust. To hold him responsible for one act when his whole career for a twelvemonth was a succession of insane deeds, would be to the last degree unreasonable and unjust.

In conclusion I desire to say that Webber's defence was conducted by his faithful counsel with learning, zeal and discretion; that science enlisted in his behalf with truth, moderation and justice; and that this man stands convicted to-day by the force of a wrong public sentiment and an antiquated judicial procedure.







